

East Hartford Gazette-Clean Stimulus Winner: Water Projects

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Clean stimulus winner: Water projects

By: Bill Doak

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With the Hartford Water Pollution Control facility as a permeating backdrop, lending its mild chemical perfume to the springtime air, Congressman John Larson (D- 1st Congressional District) happily handed a significant chunk of federal economic stimulus money to the cities and towns of Connecticut.

The large, ceremonial check printed for the occasion told the tale: \$48,010,300 made out to the state Department of Environmental Protection from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Also on hand for the announcement were U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA) Region 1 Acting Deputy

Regional Administrator Stephen Perkins and Deputy Commissioner Amey Marrella of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

The \$48 million, Congressman Larson declared, will be to "support local waste water treatment systems, create much-needed jobs, protect our environment and make lasting improvements to our state."

And perhaps the lion's share of that check will head directly into the Hartford regional Metropolitan District Commission for its 15-year, \$2.1 billion Clean Water Project now underway. The MDC plan was to have been paid for through a series of bonds approved by its member towns, and manhole rehabilitation and pipe relining has already been completed in areas of West Hartford and Newington.

More work is now underway on relining the old clay sewer pipes, some dating back over a century. In East Hartford recently, following the February collapse of a 106-year-old sewer main on Burnside Avenue, the MDC brought in a contractor, Insituform, which uses an advanced process to re-line the old pipes that avoids digging up the street. First, sewage was diverted from sections of the old pipe, then a special machine which combines chemicals in a truck, then injects them in a moving molding process to form a plasticized liner is operated through a pipe, effectively reinforcing the old pipe from the inside out with a smooth, new material.

The re-lining process will be used in sewers in the suburban towns of Bloomfield, Windsor, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield. The city of Hartford has a much bigger problem with its combined waste water and sanitary sewers beneath many streets. Work to separate the sewers and drains in Hartford has been ongoing for decades. However, according to MDC CEO Chuck Sheehan, any significant rain still overwhelms the sewage treatment plant and sewers causing the combined sewage system to overflow into basements or onto streets.

"The result is more than 1 billion gallons of untreated waste water is discharged into the Connecticut River each year," wrote Sheehan in an email. This is a regional problem since sewage from the city's suburban towns flows underground to the Hartford Wastewater treatment plant in the city's South Meadows neighborhood. When rain overwhelms the system, the city suffers the consequences.

To handle overflows, the MDC intends to separate sewers and storm water in six Hartford neighborhoods, divert storm water from the area of Homestead Avenue through a new pipe under Bushnell Park (where the Park River already runs underground to the Connecticut River) and create a large underground cistern - a containment overflow system - in the vicinity of Tower Avenue, Main and Windsor streets using micro-tunneling equipment.

Expensive? Separation of storm water from sewage in one section from Asylum Hill in Hartford down to Bushnell Park, for example, will cost \$22 million in construction costs alone, Sheehan observed. Bricks and mortar? The \$2.1 billion MDC Clean Water plan will be, to most, underground - and as such, largely invisible. Not exactly something lending itself to ribbon-cuttings or political photo ops.

Having Washington help fund the massive MDC project will relieve some of the pressure on taxpayers in the water and sewer district member towns. They all signed on in a referendum back when bond markets were much more - pardon the pun - flush.

"Fortunately, this district is represented by Congressman Larson," said Sheehan. "His efforts to secure funds, and support DEP and EPA will greatly benefit all MDC stakeholders and, most importantly, will expedite relief for the many inner city Hartford neighborhoods that endure the regular burdens of the existing inadequate system. The congressman's singular contributions to this program have been truly extraordinary and we thank him on behalf of the many generations

of Metropolitan District residents to come who will realize the benefits."

The \$48 million will go directly to the Connecticut Clean Water Fund for improving water quality to help protect rivers and other natural resources. Administered by the EPA, \$1.73 million in federal funding from the Recovery Act State Clean Diesel Grant program will be used to "clean diesel" initiatives, such as installing diesel oxidizing catalysts on 170 state Department of Transportation trucks from snow plows to dump trucks, building a 20-parking spot accessory shed for diesel trucks parked waiting at the port of New Haven so drivers won't have to idle their trucks while waiting during the winter, and replacing two diesel locomotive engines with "two tier-three generators" on New Haven-Providence-Worcester line, the EPA's Perkins said. "As Lisa Jackson says, 'EPA is back on the job.'"

Lisa Jackson is President Obama's new Environmental Protection Agency administrator in Washington, D.C.

The \$48 million "will be leveraged to do \$85 million-worth" of improvements to municipal sewer systems and wastewater treatment plants, Larson noted, because the Clean Water Fund provides both grants and loans to finance the clean water projects.

"As a state senator, I fought for the passage of the Connecticut Clean Water Fund as a means to keep our residents and our environment safe. Now more than 20 years later, Connecticut serves as a national model," said Larson.

"President Obama and the United States Congress set forth a path for our nation with the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. During these difficult economic times, we can restore economic stability and ensure the safety of our citizens and our environment at the same time. With these funds, much needed jobs are created, while essential clean water improvements, in Hartford and throughout the state, are made to guarantee the water is safe and our environment is protected," Larson added.

Amey Marrella, who was introduced as "acting commissioner" of the DEP is actually the Deputy Commissioner. DEP commissioner Gina McCarthy was on vacation and preparing for her congressional confirmation process expected to begin Thursday. McCarthy was nominated by President Barack Obama as assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"All of us reap the benefits of our environment, and the residents of the state of Connecticut are especially thankful. We welcome these federal dollars for our Clean Water Fund (CWF). It is the perfect use of stimulus funds. This money will support local waste water treatment systems, create much-needed jobs, protect our environment and make lasting improvements to our state. We will continue doing the public process with transparency that is so essential. Thank you."

Marrella noted the presentation comes just before Earth Day, April 22.

"We celebrate for more than just a day - Earth Day lasts for the 7 days before and 7 days after. It's a big celebration for us environmentalists everywhere."